

# An investigation into the effect of English learners' dictionaries on international students' acquisition of the English article system

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*Learners' dictionaries are a resource which is often overlooked by both students and teachers of English as a Second Language. The wealth of grammatical information contained within them, however, can help students to improve their English language skills and, *ipso facto*, their academic writing. In this study, four groups of university ESL students participated in a session to improve their use of the English article system. Two of the groups used English learners' dictionaries and two did not. The results of the study indicate that the students who used the dictionaries achieved a slightly higher number of correct answers in the given article exercises, and expressed a higher level of satisfaction with the session, than those who had not used dictionaries. It is therefore suggested that greater use be made of learners' dictionaries in ESL grammar classes and that more teaching time be allocated to exploring and utilising this valuable resource.*

Articles, countability, ESL, teachers, learners' dictionaries

## INTRODUCTION

The terms 'countable' and 'uncountable' in regard to English nouns stem from Jespersen's *Modern English Grammar* of 1914, and were first included in a learners' dictionary of English in 1938, when Palmer made the distinction in his *Grammar of English Words* (Cowie, 1999, p. 26). Hornby et al.'s *Idiomatic and Syntactic English Dictionary*, published in 1942, also included this information (Cowie, 1999, p. 46), introducing the now familiar labels [C] and [U]. Since then the inclusion of countability in learners' dictionaries has provided successive generations of students with a ready-made tool to help them acquire one of the hardest grammatical features of the English language. Indeed, according to Kirkness (2004), the monolingual learners' dictionary "represents for teachers and learners alike perhaps the single most valuable source of linguistic information on all aspects of the target language" (p.78). Learners can not only correct their lexical errors and add to their vocabulary by using a dictionary; they can also improve their use of grammar. In the field of pedagogical lexicography, little research appears to have been conducted into the improvement of learners' grammar through the use of exercises, which combine grammatical instruction and dictionary use. Few teachers, in fact, use dictionaries when teaching grammar, and they and their students are unaware of the riches to be found in a learners' dictionary.

The study that follows is a preliminary study that aims to investigate the effectiveness of dictionary use for ESL students studying the English article system, specifically in regard to countability. It also presents students' views on the use of dictionaries. Although in this case dictionaries led to only a small improvement in the accurate use of articles, it is suggested that

more systematic use of dictionaries in grammar classes and more thorough training in dictionary use would lead to greater accuracy.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Learners' Dictionaries**

For many students and teachers, a dictionary is little more than a resource for checking the meaning and spelling of unfamiliar words. This perception may have been coloured by dictionary publishers' own promotional information (Hartmann, 1986, p. 123). If only spelling and basic meaning are consulted, then the cheapest and most useful option is seen to be a small pocket edition of a bilingual or native speaker's dictionary or, depending on the technology available and the means to buy it, an electronic translator, which may contain a more complete learners' dictionary. (Teacher experience, were it to be quantified in a future study, would probably reveal that this feature of the electronic dictionary is seldom used. I have certainly found this to be the case with my own students.) Many studies have revealed that students (and many teachers) are not aware of the wealth of information contained in those dictionaries designed specifically for speakers of English as a second or foreign language (Atkins and Varantola, 1998a; Bensoussan, Sim and Weiss, 1984). Those students who do possess a monolingual English learners' dictionary often do not use it effectively (Béjoint, 1981).

In order to make maximum use of their dictionaries, learners need to be trained (Atkins and Varantola, 1998a, p.115), but even specific instruction does not necessarily increase learners' use of dictionaries (Atkins and Varantola, 1998b, p.36). Most students have no conception of the number of words they really need to look up (Bogaards, 1998, p.156), and even when students are aware of their need they still do not use the dictionary (Bensoussan, Sim and Weiss, 1984, p.266). In respect to the more specialised learners' dictionary, a study by Chi and Yeung (1998) revealed that participants seldom consulted their learners' dictionaries for grammatical information, even when they had been shown how to access this facility.

This reluctance to use the dictionary, and especially the learners' dictionary, as a resource is not confined to students. Many teachers, in fact, do not realise that dictionaries can be used to access grammatical information (Underhill, 1985, p.106), although the fact that such information is included "implies that the learner is going to use the Dictionary in order to foster his productive use of language, rather than just as an aid to comprehension" (Jackson, 1985, p.59). Chi (2003, p.11) suggests that "teachers themselves . . . need training to discern the innovative features found in current dictionaries in order to teach students how to use them".

### **The English Article System**

In terms of grammar teaching and learning, one of the most common problems for students of English is the English article system. This system is notoriously difficult for non-native speakers of English to grasp, and many English grammar books therefore contain exercises and examples for language students to work through. There is a vast difference, however, between working through examples where gaps are indicated, and actually using articles productively in one's own writing. The whole concept of definiteness, for example, is infinitely complicated and takes many years to master in a target language environment. However, since the definite article (*the*) is the most common word in the English language and the indefinite article (*a*) the fifth most common (Sinclair, 1991, cited in Master, 2002, p.332), errors with these two words automatically mark a person out as a non-native speaker. Moreover, errors in English may call into question the person's general competence in their field. As Master (1997, p.216) indicates, "imperfect control [of the use of articles] may . . . suggest imperfect knowledge". It is therefore important for non-native

speakers to use articles as accurately as possible, and any tool which helps them to do this will be valuable.

One small step on the road to correct article use is an improved grasp of the notion of countability (Butler, 2002, p.475). In English, nouns are divided into "countable" and "uncountable" (or "count" and "non count"). Countable nouns (such as *cat*, *house* or *mouse*) can be made plural, either conventionally (by adding *-s* or *-es*, as in *cats* or *houses*) or by changing the root (as in *mice*). Uncountable nouns cannot be made grammatically plural, although an increasing number of traditionally uncountable nouns are now becoming plural, especially in academic circles (as in, for example, *behaviours*, or even *Englishes*). In these cases, the plural form suggest the notion of "a type of", so that *Englishes* refers to "varieties of English" and *behaviours* means "kinds of behaviour". Establishing a noun's countability means that the writer can decide if an indefinite article is appropriate or not, since only singular, countable nouns can be preceded by "a". Countability also helps the user decide whether the noun should be singular or plural, since uncountable nouns, with the exception mentioned above, cannot be made plural. The English learners' dictionary provides a ready-made tool for non-native English speakers, since all the major learners' dictionaries (*Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, *Collins COBUILD Advanced Learner's English Dictionary*, *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* and *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*) indicate countability.

While many studies have examined users' look up skills, few studies have investigated the use of dictionaries to teach and learn specific grammatical items. In the study that follows, advanced level students were involved in a grammar teaching session based on the use of English articles. Half the students used English learners' dictionaries and half did not. Those who used dictionaries were encouraged to check whether the nouns in question were countable or uncountable, by consulting the dictionary symbols C (for "countable") and U (for "uncountable"). The accuracy of all the students' answers was then compared to see whether the use of a dictionary had helped students to make better article choices than those who had not used a dictionary.

## THE STUDY

### Participants

All the participants in this study were postgraduate international students involved in an introductory academic program at a South Australian university, with an average length of English study from seven to ten years. They were taught in four separate groups, having been randomly assigned to these groups at the start of the program. The groups who did not use dictionaries (Groups 1 and 4) had an average overall IELTS score of 6.5, and an average IELTS writing score of 6.3. The two groups who used dictionaries (Groups 2 and 3) had an average overall IELTS score of 6.3 and an average IELTS writing score of 6.2. The students ranged in age from 21 to 46 years, with the average age of the non-dictionary users being 31 years and the average age of the dictionary users being 33 years. The students in Groups 1 and 4 were from Laos (6), Papua New Guinea (6), Cambodia (5), Indonesia (5), Kenya (3), Vietnam (3), Bangladesh (2), East Timor (1) and Mongolia (1). Thirteen were male and 19 were female. Group 2 and 3 students were from Indonesia (13), the Philippines (6), Cambodia (4), Laos (2), Mongolia (2), Papua New Guinea (2), Bangladesh (1), Fiji (1), Lesotho (1), Sri Lanka (1) and Vietnam (1). Thirteen were male and 21 were female. Group 1 and 4 students were studying banking and international finance, education, environmental health, environmental sciences, international business, IT, social work and women's studies. Groups 2 and 3 students were enrolled in biotechnology, health sciences, international relations, nursing and public administration. It can be seen that, in terms of

demographics, there was little difference between the two groups, with the exception of the larger number of Indonesian students among those using dictionaries (Groups 2 and 3).

## **Method**

For timetabling reasons, I taught the dictionary Groups 2 and 3, while two other teachers taught Groups 1 and 4. In Stage one, at the start of the session, each student was given a pre-test exercise consisting of five passages from which articles had been deleted (see Appendix 1). The first two passages contained an underlined space indicating a missing article. The last three passages had no gaps indicated. All the passages were taken from *Making the Grade* (Hay, Bochner and Dungey, 2002), a book of academic skills advice designed for university students. The exercise had previously been completed by five native speakers in order to find alternative answers. The articles for these alternatives were then supplied, leaving gaps only for those articles which presented little or no controversy. The exercise was conducted twice by the native speakers, at an interval of seven days, in order to achieve consistency and avoid leaving gaps where there was debate over the choice of article. The two gapfill passages contained gaps of a minimum of two words and a maximum of 50 words. The average Flesch Reading Ease score for these passages was 46.5, with an average Flesch-Kincaid grade level of 11.55. The three non-gapped passages had a minimum gap of four words and a maximum of 31. The average Flesch Reading Ease score was 54.9 and the Flesch-Kincaid grade level was 10.43. Since all the students were studying at university level, the reading difficulty of these passages was felt to be appropriate by the researcher.

In Stage two, after the pre-test exercise, a lesson was taught on the English article system, during which students were encouraged to remember or deduce their own rules in respect to article usage. (For further details of a similar lesson, see Miller, 2005). Following this, the students worked through an articles exercise together, with the gaps for articles indicated. In Stage three, at the end of the session, they were asked to do a post-test exercise (identical to the pre-test exercise) and complete a questionnaire (see Appendix 2). The lesson was identical for all the groups, but Groups 2 and 3 were given basic instruction in how to use a learners' dictionary and were requested to use the dictionary for the post-test exercise.

The dictionaries used in the session were limited to those hard copies available in the centre where the classes were being held: *Collins COBUILD* (1987, 1995 and 1996 editions); *Collins COBUILD Advanced Learner's English Dictionary* (2003); *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2003); *Cambridge Learner's Dictionary* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) (2004); and *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2003).

## **FINDINGS**

Not all the students in Groups 2 and 3 used the dictionaries provided. However, these groups had more correct answers post-test, especially in the gapfill exercises. The non-dictionary Groups 1 and 4 made more changes in total (both correct and incorrect) from pre- to post-test. This would seem to indicate that the use of the dictionary guided groups 2 and 3 in their choices and prompted them to think more carefully and make fewer random changes.

Table 1 presents the percentages of correct answers between dictionary users and non-dictionary users in exercises from which articles had been omitted. At Stage one, Groups 1 and 4 had an average of 64 per cent correct answers for the gapfill exercises, rising to only 65 per cent at Stage three. For the non-gapped exercises, they scored 33 per cent (Stage one) and 40 per cent (Stage three). Groups 2 and 3 scored 67 per cent for the gapfill exercises at Stage one, rising to 73.4 per cent at Stage three. They scored 30 per cent for the non-gapped exercises at Stage one and 35 per

cent at Stage three. The overall increase in correctness for both exercises was six per cent for Groups 2 and 3 and four per cent for Groups 1 and 4.

**Table 1. Comparison of percentages of correct answers between dictionary users and non-dictionary users in exercises from which articles had been omitted**

		Correct Answers		Increase in correctness	
		Pre-test	Post-test	Overall increase in correctness	
Groups 1 and 4 (n=32) (non-dictionary users)	Gapfill exercises	64%	65%	1%	4%
Groups 2 and 3 (n=34) (dictionary users)	Non-gapped exercises	33%	40%	7%	
	Gapfill exercises	67%	73.4%	6.4%	6%
	Non-gapped exercises	30%	35%	5%	

Table 2 compares changes in answers to articles exercises between dictionary users and non-dictionary users. Groups 1 and 4 made more incorrect changes in both exercises than the dictionary groups, with an average of 1.3 incorrect changes per student in the gapfill exercises (compared to 1.2 for the dictionary groups) and 2.62 in the non-gapped exercises (compared to 1.44). In terms of correct changes, groups 1 and 4 made more correct changes in the non-gapped exercise (4.14, compared to 3.06), while the dictionary users made more correct changes in the gapfill exercises (1.68, compared to 1.28).

**Table 2. Comparison of changes in answers to articles exercises between dictionary users and non-dictionary users**

		Average number of changes per student	
		Incorrect changes	Correct changes
Groups 1 and 4 (n=32) (non-dictionary users)	Gapfill exercises	1.3	1.28
Groups 2 and 3 (n=34) (dictionary users)	Non-gapped exercises	2.62	4.14
	Gapfill exercises	1.2	1.68
	Non-gapped exercises	1.44	3.06

Table 3 presents responses to the questionnaire on an articles teaching session. On average, the dictionary groups' responses to the questionnaire show that they benefited slightly more from the session than the other groups. On a Likert scale of 1 to 7, with 7 representing 'excellent' and 1 representing 'very poor', they gave an average response of 5.8 to the question, "How would you rate the effectiveness of the session?". This compares to 5.4 in the non-dictionary groups. They also indicated that the session had met their needs by rating it at 6 out of 7, as compared to 5.3 for the other groups. Although they found the material hard, and thought that articles were difficult, the session seemed to have given them more confidence in their use of articles, as they ranked "achievable use of articles" as 5.4 out of 7, compared to the other groups' ranking of 4.6.

**Table 3. Responses to questionnaire on an articles teaching session**

		Groups 1 and 4 (non-dictionary users)	Groups 2 and 3 (dictionary users)
Effectiveness of session	(7 – excellent; 1 – very poor)	5.4	5.8
Session met my needs	(7 – very much; 1 – not at all)	5.3	6
Material	(7 – too hard; 1 – too easy)	4.6	4.9
Before, I thought articles were	(7 - too hard; 1 - very easy)	4.4	4.6
Now I think articles are	(7 – achievable; 1 – very difficult)	4.6	5.4

## Discussion

The small difference in increased correctness between the dictionary and non-dictionary users was disappointing, but may be attributed to the users' lack of familiarity with the dictionaries, and their reluctance to check every noun in the dictionary for countability. Furthermore, since few users were aware of the grammatical information to be found in a learners' dictionary (Chi, 2003, p.51),

the habit of using a dictionary for this purpose was probably still unformed. At times in this study, parts of speech were confused, so that words such as "stumble", in the first non-gapped exercise, were regarded as nouns instead of verbs. Closer use of the dictionary would have identified the word correctly. This confirms the observation of Nesi and Haill (2002) that students frequently fail to identify parts of speech, thus hindering their dictionary searches. The findings generally are in line with Nesi and Meara's statement that there was "no significant difference in the accuracy of sentences produced after consulting entries from LDOCE-2, COBUILD-1, and the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OALD-4)" (Nesi and Meara, 1994, cited in Nesi, 1998 p.159).

Although it might have been expected that the use of a dictionary would provide added incentive to check the countability status of nouns, even when gaps for articles were not indicated, this would not seem to have been the case. The dictionary users made most improvements in their gapfill exercise, while the non-dictionary users made more improvements in the non-gapped exercise. On the whole, the non-dictionary users made more changes in the non-gapped exercise than the dictionary users. It might be that the fact of having the dictionary encouraged students to think more carefully about their article choices, while those who did not have dictionaries made more random changes.

While the use of dictionaries did not seem to increase grammatical accuracy, a more encouraging finding was that the exercise had made the students more aware of the dictionaries' potential. When those who had used dictionaries were asked in the questionnaire whether the exercise had changed their view of dictionaries, they made overwhelmingly positive responses:

*I know how to use the dictionaries not only to find the meaning but also how to use articles etc.*

*They are useful in academic writing.*

*This exercise made me aware of the English learners dictionary and some of its helpful features. i.e., words – classified as collective or uncollective.*

*The dictionary gives me knowledge in some difficult words (countable, uncountable, definite, etc.).*

*It is important tool in writing. Helps you understand phrases/sentences and assists in the use of 'Articles' by telling whether it is a verb, adjective, noun etc.*

*I think using a dictionary is an effective way to learn.*

*The dictionary is more complete than my dictionary. It contain uncount/count, meaning, etc.*

*I am not aware before (about) that the classification as to whether it is countable and/or uncountable is provided. I thought dictionaries give us only the meaning and the/its part of speech.*

*This dictionary is more complete and give sentence examples.*

*We should have knowledge to use Dictionary.*

*Completed dictionary with details on it use best fo [sic] study English.*

Only one student was not entirely satisfied:

*I still did not find the difference to other dictionary.*

A longitudinal study would reveal whether those students who were impressed by the learners' dictionaries would continue to use them, or use them more frequently, in subsequent classes and, more importantly, when working alone.

## Limitations

This study was undertaken on a small scale with a total of 66 students. Of these, 34 used dictionaries and 32 did not. In addition, Groups 2 (n=19) and 3 (n=15) had access to only seven dictionaries in each session, meaning that there were at least two, and sometimes three, students per dictionary. Due to difficulties with room allocation, Group 3's session was slightly curtailed, and this might also have influenced their results. Although all the groups were given the same lesson in regard to article use, the fact that one teacher taught the two dictionary groups and two different teachers taught the other two groups may have coloured the responses in regard to the effectiveness of the session, with students possibly preferring one teaching style to another.

## Recommendations

It is recommended that further studies be conducted with a larger group of students. If possible, more dictionaries should be made available (although the cost of these, and the difficulty of transporting so many heavy books, may make this suggestion untenable). A longitudinal study is likely to show benefits accrued from dictionary usage not just in the short term, but as a permanent improvement in students' writing levels. In regard to the exercise, it is suggested that more unusual nouns be used, so that students are more reliant on their dictionary to check the countability status of unfamiliar words. More non-gap exercises and fewer or no gapfill exercises are likely to stretch the students' thinking and emphasise the problem that is being addressed, while at the same time providing a closer simulation to the students' own writing practice, where they are forced to decide if an article is needed without the benefit of a space indicating that an article is required.

## CONCLUSIONS

Overall, despite the small scale of the study, the importance of using a dictionary to enhance grammatical capability, specifically in the area of English articles, should be acknowledged. Even where students did not use the dictionary in their possession, they realised its potential, stating a greater satisfaction with the session and giving more positive feedback on all questions. They also showed a slightly greater improvement in correct answers. The perennial problem of lack of dictionary skills and reluctance to use a dictionary might be overcome if teachers were willing to devote more time to instruction in dictionary use. As Béjoint says, "foreign students need to be given enough information to help them avoid mistakes, and possibly even to attain ease, elegance and subtlety in their use of the foreign language" (1981, p.211). This information is presented in all the major learners' dictionaries, but it is frequently neglected. It is the teacher's responsibility to help students to find this information, but before that can happen teachers themselves need to be made more aware of the possibilities of pedagogical lexicography.

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## APPENDIX 1

### Can you insert articles in the gaps when necessary?

Of all sections of \_\_\_\_\_ report other than \_\_\_\_\_ title, \_\_\_\_\_ abstract or executive summary is \_\_\_\_\_ most likely to be read. It is important, therefore, to make it easy to understand. An abstract is \_\_\_\_\_ coherent and concise statement, intelligible on its own, which typically provides concise answers to each of \_\_\_\_\_ five investigative questions outlined at \_\_\_\_\_ beginning of this chapter.

*Making the Grade, p.92*

Abstracts usually comprise \_\_\_\_\_ single paragraph, although long abstracts might require more. They do not usually contain tables, figures, or formulae, and they should not discuss anything not covered in \_\_\_\_\_ paper or report. All unfamiliar terms should be defined, as should acronyms (for example NATO) and non-standard abbreviations (for example dBA). Avoid referring to other work in an abstract. If you do refer to specific works or individuals, they must be included in the list of references associated with \_\_\_\_\_ full paper. It is \_\_\_\_\_ matter of common style that issues included or discussed in \_\_\_\_\_ main paper are presented in \_\_\_\_\_ present tense whereas what the author did and thought is written in \_\_\_\_\_ past tense.

*Making the Grade, p.94*

### Can you insert articles in the following passages where necessary?

In many disciplines, but not all, an oral presentation is used to present essence of some body of material. You might imagine the talk to be like a trailer for movie. It presents the highlights and captures your imagination. If audience wants to know more, they should come along to the full screening of film (that is, read full paper). Depending on your circumstances, it might be helpful, therefore, to prepare for distribution to audience sufficient numbers of either a full copy of paper on which presentation is based or written summary. With such document, audience is better able to keep track of presentation, and you are freer to highlight the central ideas and findings instead of spending valuable time covering the explanatory detail.

*Making the Grade, p.188*

Your audience wants you to do well. They want to listen to you giving good talk, and they will be supportive and grateful if you are well prepared, even if you do stumble in your presentation or blush and stammer. The guidelines outlined here offer 'target' at which you can aim. No one expects you to give flawless presentation.

It will make your presentation more convincing and credible if you remember, and act on, fact that the audience comprises individuals, each of whom is listening to you. You are not talking to some large, amorphous body. Imagine that you are telling your story to one or two people and not to a larger group.

*Making the Grade, p.192*

When you write report, you might need to write literature review to provide the background to your research. The literature review is sometimes presented as separate part of the report, after introduction and before discussion of material and methods which were used. It provides comprehensive summary of publications and reports related to a piece of research.

*Making the Grade, p.95*

### Answers to exercises (as found in the original passages)

Of all sections of a report other than **the** title, **the** abstract or executive summary is **the** most likely to be read. It is important, therefore, to make it easy to understand. An abstract is a coherent and

concise statement, intelligible on its own, which typically provides concise answers to each of **the** five investigative questions outlined at **the** beginning of this chapter.

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When you write a report, you might need to write a literature review to provide the background to your research. The literature review is sometimes presented as a separate part of the report, after **the** introduction and before **the** discussion of **the** material and methods which were used. It provides a comprehensive summary of **the** publications and reports related to a piece of research.

## APPENDIX 2

### Questionnaire

How long have you been studying English? Please circle the answer.

1-3 years   4-6 years   7-10 years   11-15 years   15+ years

Are you studying a postgraduate or an undergraduate course? Please circle the answer.

Postgraduate                    Undergraduate

What was your overall (global) IELTS score?

What was your IELTS writing test score?

1. How many dictionaries do you own?
2. What are their names (and dates of publication, if you know them)?

3. Have you ever used an English learner's dictionary?
4. If so, which one?
5. If you have used an English learner's dictionary, is it part of an electronic dictionary?
6. What dictionary did you use to do this exercise?
7. Has this exercise changed your view of dictionaries? Give details.
8. What was the most useful aspect of the session?
9. How could the session be improved?
10. Other comments
11. How would you rate the effectiveness of this session?

Excellent							Very poor
7	6	5	4	3	2	1	

12. The session met my needs.

Strongly agree							Strongly disagree
7	6	5	4	3	2	1	

13. The material presented was:

Too hard							Too easy
7	6	5	4	3	2	1	

14. Before the session, I thought that the correct use of articles was:

Too hard							Very easy
7	6	5	4	3	2	1	

15. Now, after the session, I think the correct use of articles is:

Achievable							Very difficult
7	6	5	4	3	2	1	